

## **Testing Maslow's Theory of Hierarchy in A COVID-19 Pandemic Climate: The Experience of a Small, Private Liberal Arts College**

Ronald Eric Matthews, Jr., Notre Dame College  
rmatthews@ndc.edu

Gregory Moore, Notre Dame College  
gmoore@ndc.edu

Kelley Cronin, Notre Dame College  
kroninc@ndc.edu

---

### **ABOUT NOTRE DAME COLLEGE AND THE ONSET OF COVID**

Notre Dame College (NDC), a small liberal arts institution located in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, was faced with a unique challenge in the Spring of 2020. Known nationally for its mission of teaching personal, professional, and global responsibility in the academic traditions of the Sisters of Notre Dame, the institution suddenly found itself in a trial unlike any the institution had faced before. How could the College maintain a community of educators when internal factors and external societal inequalities become suddenly real and threatened the sustainability of the institution? How could levels of optimism and community in the face of a global pandemic be maintained, with pessimism levels soaring and isolation becoming the normal operating procedure? This essay provides answers to these questions by addressing NDC's challenge in addressing the needs of the students, faculty, and staff as well as the institution, while being faced with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adding to the challenge was a change in NDC's administration. Dr. J. Michael Pressimone had been hired as the College's fifteenth president approximately three weeks before the College closed for the remainder of the Spring semester. Although slated to begin his tenure on July 1, 2020, Dr. Pressimone was able to arrange to join the College in early April and quickly began to work with the administration and faculty to prepare for the Fall semester.

As the COVID-19 pandemic closed the campus and scattered more than 1,000 students across the globe, faculty and staff began the important process of addressing student concerns using data analytics, anecdotal information, and approved practices. The overall realization that became readily apparent was that each student was experiencing the pandemic differently and the challenges they were facing went well beyond the parameters of the classroom. Faculty and staff quickly recognized that those who had taken an Introduction to Psychology course were now watching Maslow's Theory of Hierarchy become reality.

As one recalls, Maslow (1943) categorized an individual's motivation into basic needs, psychological needs, and self-fulfillment needs (see also McLeod, 2018). If NDC was going to successfully weather the COVID-19 pandemic, Maslow's theory would have to be put to the test

and operationalized in immediate action. It quickly became apparent that his analysis was correct—conceptualized motivation is a pluralistic behavior, whereby needs can operate on many levels simultaneously (Tay & Diener, 2011). During the second week of March when the full magnitude of the pandemic was being realized, the initial perception was that two weeks would be the timeframe for the viral response; it quickly became apparent that individualized long-term strategic intervention would be standard operating procedure as the institution as a whole intensified its mission of addressing its personal, professional, and global responsibility to our students, our community, and each other.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SAFETY NEEDS**

In addressing the basic needs of NDC students (physiological and safety), the following intervention strategies were implemented:

- **Food:** Feeding students amid a pandemic is uncharted territory for anyone, including NDC, which delivers more than 3,000 hot meals a day. With the campus facilities immediately going into shutdown mode, the Office of Student Affairs spearheaded a plan to continue to feed students by incorporating “a Meals on Wheels” approach. Students on a meal plan and in many cases, students that simply did not have access to food, were provided takeout meals.
- **Shelter:** As students left the facility, many students had no place to go. Residence halls were segregated into small units where students could maintain social distancing and have a level of comfort. Off-campus students received assistance with transportation, funds for utilities, and cleaning supplies.
- **Safety:** In addition to establishing institutional-wide protocols, hundreds of manhours were spent to ensure that all of our international students and out-of-state students returned home safely. This included arranging for international flights, addressing quarantine issues, assisting with travel vouchers, etc.

In addressing the psychological needs (community, self-esteem, feeling of accomplishment), NDC developed the following programs to ensure that students felt connected, valued and important:

- **Care Teams:** Over 20 faculty and staff developed systematic procedures for reaching out to every student at least once a week, the results of which were entered into a data bank and shared with key staff and administrators. Many students received financial rebates for residence fees.
- **Technology:** To ensure community connections, NDC upgraded its internet capacity and its Virtual Private Network (VPN). Students, faculty, and staff received training in Microsoft Teams and Zoom. iPads, tablets, and notebooks were provided to displaced students. Working with Spectrum, broadband and internet connections were provided free of charge to students needing assistance. For some students who left campus abruptly, their smartphones were their only source of technology. Faculty accommodated students with those limitations through a variety of means such as permitting dial-in-only on Zoom calls and texting short assignments.
- **Recognizing that students learn using different modalities, it became necessary to develop synchronous and asynchronous approaches to the “new” classroom. Lectures and**

labs were taught online (OL), videotaped, and provided to students who lived in different time zones, had work responsibilities, or had limited internet access. Faculty were given the flexibility to revise their syllabi as long as learning objectives were met. The final exam week was eliminated, allowing for more classroom time, and in some cases final projects had to be altered in order to adapt to the realities of the new learning environment.

- **Registration/Advising:** When the State of Ohio declared an emergency and NDC abruptly closed, the college was in the middle of Spring advising/registration for the Fall 2020 semester. Unlike larger institutions, NDC faculty advisors hold individual advising sessions with students, offering personalized attention. The sudden shift to remote learning left advising sessions in the dust. Faculty and students were forced to use alternative means such as email, virtual office hours, and phone calls to continue the advising and registration process.

### **SELF-FULFILLMENT NEEDS**

Self-fulfillment, the third level of Maslow's hierarchy (1943) occurred organically and holistically. Students, staff and faculty, while challenged with the sudden upheaval in the community, responded with concern and individual support. The June 2020 virtual graduation exceeded expectations, student participation and attendance in classes was improved, and chat boards and class discussions were more intense as students became more engaged. Withdrawal dates for students were extended as was the drop-add period, but few students exercised this option. Persistence rates for returning students has been higher than normal, first-year freshman rates are meeting targeted expectations, OL learning opportunities are on the rise, and students have indicated in surveys that they are excited to return to the classrooms and reengage in their community.

All did not go smoothly, however. Adjunct faculty reported that the abrupt transition within the learning environment left some of them feeling they had not been given enough direction in terms of managing the transition and adapting to the changes taking place to their classes. Despite the best efforts of faculty and administration, student participation in their classes was uneven, and it was often necessary to remind students to submit assignments on time. Faculty utilizing Zoom or Teams for virtual class meetings sometimes found it disconcerting to have boxes with a student's initials on the screen rather than a picture or video, adding to the faculty member's sense of isolation.

The College's OL programs may not have been as affected by the impact of COVID-19, but for many students, most of whom are adult learners, the pandemic created hardships. The pandemic's effect on work schedules, transition to working at home, loss of employment due to business closures or cutbacks, the challenges of having to homeschool children, and the economic impact of the pandemic created challenges to their ability to progress easily through their coursework. As with the undergraduate students, most of whom were not used to OL learning, faculty had to keep checking with their OL students to offer encouragement and support.

In addition, as the result of a Title III grant received in the Fall of 2019, a major renovation project was taking place in one of the campus buildings. Fortunately, the construction of a new computer lab dedicated to NDC's new baccalaureate degree in cybersecurity and an adjoining situation room was able to proceed without interruption.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in policy changes around the globe and institutions of higher learning are not immune. NDC has developed the following protocols for Fall 2020:

- Through the development of the Falcon Flex program, students will return to the classroom in a split schedule format. Using social distancing and technology, classroom rosters will be divided, and students will alternate between being “live in the classroom” and “live on Zoom/Microsoft Teams.” Classrooms are being updated with high-quality cameras, microphones, and speakers to assist with engaging remote students. Students will also be able to borrow laptop computers and have access to an upgraded wireless network on campus. Increased tutoring capabilities will also be available.
- The Office of Admissions has developed a program of “resilience education” through the transition to a completely remote OL orientation program. Utilizing the College’s OL learning management system, students are assigned texts and videos to read and watch while interacting with each other through discussion boards.
- All classrooms will be cleaned and disinfected following each class meeting.
- New approaches are being looked at for meal distribution, residence halls placements, and athletic events.
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) and social distancing will be required in accordance with governmental mandates and health guidelines.
- At-risk populations (faculty and students) will have the option to teach remotely using technology and a synchronous approach.

NDC re-opened on August 31 with the semester’s end scheduled for December 11. Classes were held on Labor Day and the Fall break was cancelled. There will be no finals week; final exams or projects will be incorporated into the last week of class. Prior to reopening, faculty underwent intensive training on the new technology that had been installed in selected classrooms where “live in class” and “live on Zoom” courses would meet.

At present, this transition has met with mixed results. Transitioning the designated classrooms for the technological upgrade took longer than anticipated with some not being ready until the third week of class. Some faculty and students have expressed frustration with the changeover and adaptation to the new learning environment. Book orders proved to be especially challenging as many students reported delays in receiving their textbooks, which often put them behind those who had received theirs. Overall, the College has, midway through the new semester, experienced a generally positive response from students, faculty and administration. However, reflective of the new spike in coronavirus cases, in Ohio as well as around the country, the College recently announced a transition to fully remote learning following the Thanksgiving break. Plans call for the campus to re-open in January 2021.

Maslow (1943) and researchers such as Mcleod (2018) were correct in their analysis- conceptualized motivation is a pluralistic behavior, whereby needs can operate on many levels

simultaneously. Through the concerted efforts of the faculty, staff, administrators, and students, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided NDC with the opportunity to live its mission: to demonstrate personal, professional, and global responsibility for each other and our community.

**REFERENCES**

- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-96.
- McLeod, S. A. (2018, May 21). Maslow's hierarchy of needs.  
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>
- Tay, L., & Diener, E. (2011). Needs and subjective well-being around the world. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(2), 354-356. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023779>